

A Growing Embassy Reflects Role in Area

Saturday, July 23, 1983

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By EBARA CROSSETTE

Special to The New York Times

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Dept. of State, RPS/IPS, Margaret P. Grafeld, Dir.
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Date 7/23/83 Exemption

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A Growing Embassy Reflects Role in Area

By BARBARA CROSSETTE

Special to The New York Times

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, July 19 — The United States Embassy in Honduras, once a Foreign Service backwater, has over the last two years become the largest and most important American mission in Central America.

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By the embassy's own count, the United States now has close to 300 military advisers, technicians and engineers in Honduras, not counting the eight officers and nine enlisted men attached to the military attaché's office and the Military Assistance Group.

The embassy staff numbers over 140, at least 35 of them with diplomatic rank. Most other foreign missions here, according to American diplomats, have fewer than six foreign service officers. Washington also has a strong and experienced Ambassador, John D. Negroponte, who is often rumored to be under consideration for higher policy-making posts in the Reagan Administration.

Eighteen months ago the embassy was upgraded from a Class 4 to a Class 2 mission, putting it on a par with United States embassies in such cities as Lima and Buenos Aires. Only those in Mexico City and Brasilia, Class 1 embassies, outrank it in Latin America. The embassy in El Salvador has 102 permanent American staff employees and 103 temporary duty personnel, including the military advisers training Salvadoran Army troops fighting against the guerrillas there.

In addition to the other Americans in Honduras, a large agricultural mission, composed of 15 to 20 volunteer American business leaders, has been in and out of the country recently to advise Hondurans on how to develop the country's untapped rural resources. An American legal commission is also counseling Hondurans as they begin a review of the country's archaic penal code.

The Agency for International Development employs a number of American consultants here, and more than 200 Peace Corps volunteers are scattered throughout the country.

Salvadorans in Training

Of the American military personnel publicly acknowledged to be in Honduras, 120 are members of the Seventh Special Forces, or Green Berets, who are training Salvadoran troops at an American installation still under construction at Puerto Castilla on Honduras's Caribbean coast.

About 80 members of the United States Army Corps of Engineers are extending a runway at Comayagua, northwest of Tegucigalpa. Sixty Americans are working on a radar site about 12 miles southeast of the city.

An average of 50 American military advisers are attached to the Honduran armed forces; the number can go higher or lower at any time, according to the embassy. Congress has not tried to limit the number of advisers in Honduras as it has done in El Salvador.

The United States Military Assistance Group staff, which supervises the advisers, has four officers and five enlisted men. The military attaché's of-

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American and Honduran officials say that however large the American military presence, it is dwarfed by the number of Cuban and Soviet advisers in Nicaragua. Honduras's Foreign Minister, Edgardo Paz Barmica, says there are 17,000 Cubans, Russians and Eastern Europeans in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Government says that there are only a few thousand and that many of them are engaged in civilian projects.

Harder to measure are the numbers of American citizens involved in the guerrilla war being waged against Nicaragua from Honduras. There are reports here and in Nicaragua of American freelance pilots — of which there have always been a substantial number in Central America — working with the anti-Sandinista guerrillas.

Journalists who have traveled to the area of fighting in northern Nicaragua, as well as some Western diplomats here, also believe that an unknown number of Spanish-speaking Americans of Cuban and Mexican descent have privately joined the Honduras-based forces through recruitment drives in Miami.

Both the Reagan Administration and the anti-Sandinista guerrillas deny that American servicemen are directly involved in the fighting in Nicaragua, although they acknowledge that financial and material help has come from Washington.

"We never had even one American trainer," Edgar Chamorro Coronel, a leader of the rebels' Nicaraguan Democratic Forces, said in an interview here recently. "We don't need trainers: We have plenty of people who have been to Fort Bragg, Fort Knox and Fort Gulick."

Dr. Chamorro also said that his forces had regular contacts with American intelligence agents, but that these agents were "sent down from Washington" rather than attached to the United States Embassy here. Embassies do not enumerate or identify members of intelligence services, citing the safety of the people involved and the need for secrecy in their operations.

In an interview last week in San José, Costa Rica, Brooklyn Rivera, a leader of Nicaraguan Miskito Indian exiles who are also in revolt against the Government in Managua, said that during his time in Honduras working with the anti-Sandinistas he had not encountered any American servicemen advising or fighting with the rebels. Mr. Rivera broke last year with the Honduras-based rebels because of the preponderance in their leadership of former officers of the national guard of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. He has since allied his Indian organization, Misurasata, with the forces of Edén Pastora Gómez, who is fighting the Nicaraguans from the Costa Rican side.

Expelled by Honduras

Mr. Rivera, who said the Hondurans expelled him from the country last June because of his decision, said he believed it was the Honduran Army under Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, the armed forces' chief, who was giving orders to the Honduras-based guerrillas on behalf of the United States. He added that he believed the Hondurans were serving as the conduit for United States aid to the rebels. This would permit the Americans to remain only indirectly involved with the guerrilla forces.

A spokesman for the Honduras-based rebels confirmed here that the Nicaraguan Democratic Force was being "advised" — sometimes badly, he said — by the Hondurans. The Honduran Government has repeatedly denied that its army is involved with the guerrillas or that the rebels are operating from Honduran territory.

The cultivation of Honduras as a base of operations against Nicaragua has been part of American foreign policy since the years of President Carter, ac-

companied with long service in the area.

According to their analyses, the United States realized after the fall of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 that the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua had the potential for spreading rebellion in Central America. Washington then began to cast about for allies in the area, but saw only military governments with which it would be politically awkward to cooperate.

The exception was Costa Rica, a strong democracy. But Costa Rica was ruled out, diplomats say, because of its unwillingness to take sides and the strength of its democratic-socialist traditions.

Civilian Rule Pressed

According to diplomats, the Carter and Reagan Administrations pressed Honduras and Guatemala to return to civilian rule so that they could be held up as examples of a democratic alternative. Both countries held national elections last year, but the voting was annulled in Guatemala by the coup that ultimately brought Gen. Efraim Ríos Montt to power.

That left Honduras, a poor but largely peaceful country. As Honduras has grown as Washington's base of operations in the area, the United States has tried to contribute to the development of the country. The appointment of a commission headed by Henry A. Kissinger is seen here as one more in a series of attempts to confront what successive American administrations have conceded were huge social and economic problems in the region.

Many diplomats here are skeptical that the United States can succeed, in either a military or economic sense, in isolating Nicaragua or strengthening Honduras to stand on its own as a strong ally in the region.

A Western European diplomat said in an interview that the veneer of democracy was so thin in Honduras, and the human resources of the country so badly neglected, that only enormous amounts of aid and wide involvement in the running of the country would begin to attack its problems. There is no indication that the United States Congress would ever permit the White House that latitude.

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